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# DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS

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*No subject is more vital to Christian civilization than the family. A study of statistics as regards both marriage and illegitimacy is likely to prove very discouraging. Many teachers, in despair of other regulation, are looking to a literal application of the words of Jesus. Just how far the movement is justified may be inferred from the accompanying paper, in which the vital question as to the precise words of Jesus is raised and discussed.*

The regulation of marriage and divorce was once thought to lie wholly within the power of the church. With the separation of church and state the latter constituted itself the ultimate authority on both of these questions. The clergy may, by courtesy of the state, still perform the marriage ceremony, but the church, at least in the United States, no longer possesses any judicial right either to forbid marriage or to grant a decree of divorce.

Yet the church does not cease to concern itself with these problems. This does not mean of course that ecclesiastics are clamoring to be reinvested with authority to issue marriage licenses and write divorce laws. Doubtless many of them would gladly accept this responsibility if it were thrust upon them—an event, however, which is not likely soon to happen. The marriage relationship is now thought to be so fundamental to our social welfare that the so-called secular authorities must assume the responsibility for its regulation. Public opinion nowadays seems to be thoroughly imbued with this idea. The function of the church, then, is to insist that the

laws regulating marriage and divorce be framed and enacted in accordance with the highest moral standards for the best interests of society.

To be sure this is what may be called the more liberal interpretation of the church's function, but it is the view which seems likely to prevail even more widely in the future than at present. The day is past when we may expect those who make and execute our laws to be guided by *ex cathedra* pronouncements of ecclesiastical tribunals. It is now assumed that the controlling interest in any effort to solve our social problems is first and always the good of humanity. Not the solution which most resembles that prescribed for similar problems in the first century of our era, but the one which produces the most satisfactory results under the new conditions of the twentieth century, is being sought at present. The philosopher calls this pragmatism; the plain man calls it common-sense.

This is not equivalent to saying that the church's opinion will no longer be heeded or that its voice should not be raised in loud protest against any in-

fringement of the moral and religious ideal. But it does mean that the justice of its protests and demands is to be judged by the practical worth of the ideas embodied in them. Its views are to be respected, not primarily because they issue from the church, but because the opinions themselves represent the most worthy standards attainable in our present state of enlightenment. In short, it is now tacitly assumed by our lawmakers, many of whom are members of Christian churches and prize the connection highly, that the church can perform an invaluable service by insistently enunciating its high ideals; but the enactment of specific rules to regulate the social life must meet the practical necessities of a very unideal situation, as was similarly the case in Moses' day, when this ancient lawgiver allowed divorce because of man's "hardness of heart."

As a result of these practical demands, divorce and remarriage have been quite generally legalized by modern lawmakers. In this the church often feels that its ideals are being sadly debased. Sometimes Christians vigorously protest against the laxity of divorce laws and emphatically declare that remarriage is wholly unjustifiable. Many clergymen feel that they cannot in good conscience perform a marriage ceremony where either of the contracting parties has been divorced and the former partner is still living. Nor is this hesitation necessarily due to doubt about the legality, or even the practical justice, of the divorce itself.

What is the reason for this attitude on the part of the church? Its chief ground seems to be a belief that Jesus pro-

nounced unfavorably against divorce and absolutely prohibited remarriage. Jesus' pre-eminence as a teacher of morals and religion is so generally recognized that we may well ask just what he did teach, and what significance his teaching has for the solution of similar problems in modern times.

Probably most people imagine that we know a great deal more about Jesus' views on this subject than actually is the case. He is reported to have spoken of this matter twice in the Gospel of Matthew, but only once in Mark and once in Luke. The passage in Mark and one of those in Matthew are reports of the same incident, while the other passage in Matthew and the verse in Luke may represent the same original saying. Thus, according to the Gospel accounts, Jesus spoke only a few words upon this subject on two, or at the most on three, occasions.

Mark 10:2-12 and Matt. 19:3-9 narrate the same incident, when the Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to put away his wife. We are all familiar with the answer which he made. Jesus refuses to dogmatize on the question. He does not condemn the divorce laws then in force, but he does censure the conditions which made such laws a necessity. Israel through "hardness of heart" failed to measure up to the ideal of a divine union which none should sunder. It is clearly implied that Jesus' remedy for the situation would not be a revocation of the Mosaic enactment, but a change of heart for Israel.

Immediately afterward, when alone with the disciples, according to the account in Mark, Jesus replied to a request for further information by

saying: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her; and if she herself shall put away her husband, and marry another, she committeth adultery." In Matthew's report of the same occasion Jesus is still speaking to the multitude, and says: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery, and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery." Again in Matt. 5:31 Jesus is made to express himself as follows: "Every one that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, maketh her an adulteress; and whosoever shall marry her when she is put away committeth adultery." Finally in Luke 16:18 Jesus is reported to have said: "Every one that putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery; and he that marrieth one that is put away from a husband committeth adultery."

From these accounts of the evangelists what are we to infer that Jesus actually said? This certainly is not a question that we can answer offhand. On the one hand he affirms without qualification that remarriage is adultery on the part of any divorced person, while on the other hand his statement is qualified by the clause "except for fornication." In one case it is the woman who divorces her husband and remarries who is guilty, in the other case it is the man who marries the divorced woman. Again, in one instance the point of emphasis is that putting away a wife and remarrying makes the man an adulterer, while in another instance it is that putting away an innocent woman makes her an adulteress.

These statements leave us perplexed. Did Jesus deny remarriage outright? "Yes," according to Mark; "No," according to Matthew. Did Jesus, while allowing that a man might justly put away an adulterous wife and remarry, stigmatize an innocent and unjustly divorced woman as an adulteress? He did, according to the statements in Matthew. Specialists in the field of Gospel research have often applied their critical acumen to these problems in an effort to determine just what Jesus said, but with varying results. The less skilled reader may, we think, get at the truth of the matter by a shorter road.

Most people nowadays are familiar, in a general way, with the story of the Gospels' origin. In their present form they are, at the earliest, representations of what the Christians of the second and third generations after Jesus' death thought their Master had done and said. Each writer gathered such information as was available in his day, and put it together for use in the instruction and edification of the Christian community, or for the benefit of some individual Christian, or for the purposes of apology and propaganda. For thirty years or more before the oldest of our Gospels, that of Mark, was written, various missionaries had been endeavoring to accomplish similar results through oral teaching and public preaching. During this period there were different types of Christian teachers at work, and the tastes and needs of various kinds of communities had to be met. Paul was by no means the only loyal missionary who tried to become all things to all men in order that he might serve them as a

minister of salvation. Under these circumstances the marvel is not that there are diverse elements in our Gospel tradition, but rather that the elements of diversity are so few.

Re-reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching about divorce and remarriage in the light of this situation, it seems quite evident that we must not attach too much weight to points of detail. The specific limitations of Jesus' general principle are quite as likely to represent the various views of early interpreters as they are to be the exact words of Jesus. Indeed this is just the impression left upon us by the diversity of statements in our Gospels. At first, Jesus refuses to dogmatize on questions of detailed adjustment, but in prophetic fashion reiterates the ideal principle that the dissolution of the marriage bond ought never to be necessary. Then he is represented as putting off the mantle of the prophet to become a rabbinical teacher pronouncing upon questions of casuistry. As the church gradually became an organized community and required rules and regulations for the direction of its society, this rabbinical Jesus was more and more in demand; but it was pre-eminently Jesus the prophet who trod the dusty roads of Palestine proclaiming the advent of the kingdom of God.

It is extremely doubtful whether we can at this late date put our finger on any specific limitation made by Jesus to the general principle that the ideal marital relation is one of inseparable and harmonious union. Much less is it probable that he posed as a dictator of future opinions on detailed questions of practical adjustment. And if we

could discover with certainty that he gave his judgment upon some specific phase of the problem as presented by the conditions of his own day, would it be fair to him to apply his solution literally at present? Perhaps he would wish to frame his answer differently if he were confronting, and teaching with definite reference to, modern conditions. At any rate, his word would probably be more searching than some opinions which are now held on the assumed authority of his name. Would he, for example, be likely to take the position, which has sometimes been taken by the church, that a divorced individual may not remarry unless perchance the other party to the divorce has died? Surely the decease of a former wife or husband cannot of itself render the survivor any more worthy than before to assume new marital responsibilities. If the individual ought not to be allowed to remarry before this event—and in many instances he probably should not—ought he to be allowed to do so afterward? Ultimately it is Jesus' great principle of brotherly love—which in modern parlance means the highest welfare of society—which must be made the key to the solution of all such problems. In comparison with this, all accidental and arbitrary enactments of a past age are of only secondary value.

To state our conclusions in a word, the modern problem regarding divorce and remarriage cannot be solved by any legalistic application of specific enactments attributed to Jesus. Not only are we insufficiently informed of his teaching on this subject, but the principle underlying this proposed method of solution puts the emphasis on the wrong place. The issue

is too vitally modern to be decided arbitrarily by the fiat of a past generation. We need, to be sure, all the help and inspiration for its solution that the past has to offer, but ultimately all these contributing factors must be put into the crucible and recast to fit the mold of actual conditions today. It may not be out of place here to remind ourselves

that the fundamental teaching of Jesus, and of the Hebrew prophets before him for that matter, is still our great ideal; namely, the establishment of a condition of society so thoroughly imbued with wisdom and grace that the marriage bond will truly represent what God has joined together and no man needs to sunder.

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## THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND SIN. I

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### PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

One questions his right to take this theme at all, for two reasons: First, because only experience of life can fitly interpret it, and without some depth of experience discussion of this dark problem is little else than mockery. One doubts the adequacy of his experience, and his capacity to see and feel deeply enough to justify discussion. One would not further darken counsel on this subject by words without knowledge. The second reason for hesitation is just because the problem is so old. It is in truth man's perennially darkest problem—the question of the ages—that seems to confront him with the constant and often-stated dilemma: either God is good and not omnipotent, or he is omnipotent and not good. No one of us can escape this challenge. In some form it concerns us all, whether our primary interest is religious or scientific or practical. At some point we all need an

assured conviction of the essential rationality of the world—that aims that compel our respect are ruling in the world. Is it at all worth while to discuss anew this age-long problem?

If, in spite of this double misgiving, and with no feeling that I have new and startling light to shed upon it, I am undertaking once more, at the editor's request, a sober survey of this most difficult problem of human existence, it is simply because even the oldest questions inevitably change their form with changing times, and so need to be reconsidered again and again; and because it is precisely in wrestling with our largest and darkest problems that our most fruitful insights are likely to come. A comprehensive, even if sober, resurvey of all that is involved in the problem of evil, natural and moral—in the question of suffering and sin—ought, then, to prove of some value. And this, in spite